

# Between Farrier Visits — Your Role As Part Of The Hoof-Care Team

## Checking a horse's feet should be a regular part of owner chores

**A**s a horse owner, you are the person most responsible for the health and welfare of your horse and its daily care. Even though your farrier may come every 5 to 8 weeks, the horse depends on you to monitor and care for its feet between visits.

If you are riding, training or handling the horse daily, you get a good opportunity to look at its feet. Regular grooming is good for your horse's coat and regular hoof care is good for its feet.

### Pick Them Up And Out

The feet should be picked up and examined each time you do anything with the horse. If you clean them out completely, you can assess the health of the frog and sole. A hoof continually packed with mud and manure is more likely to develop thrush, caused by microbes that thrive in a moist, dark, airless environment.

If your inspection helps you detect the beginnings of thrush (black grime along the edges of the frog with an unmistakable bad odor), you can treat it with a product recommended by your farrier and stop it early.

### Heat And Swelling

Picking up and cleaning the feet regularly is not only good for training and good manners — keeping the horse comfortable about having its feet handled — but also gives you a chance to detect an increase of heat in the foot or of heat and/or swelling above the hoof.

If the horse has a serious problem it will be lame. However, a problem

can start out mildly and you may not detect it early unless you are paying close attention to the feet. Finding that one hoof is hotter than the others or noticing swelling can be an early clue that something's amiss.

Morning is the best time to feel the hooves because they are generally cool that time of day and it's easier to tell if one foot is warmer than the others.

If you pick up each foot, you'll also know if there are any rocks or sharp gravel stuck into the bottom of the

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hoof. Just as you would never saddle a horse without first brushing its back to remove any matted hair/mud or dirt/debris, you should remove any rocks and debris from the bottom of its feet before you ride.

### Too Soft, Too Dry?

Monitor the feet and you will know if they become dry and brittle and vulnerable to cracking, or too soft. Hooves in a dry climate may get brittle and crack, but this can also happen if you bathe a horse too often, with water running down over its feet.

Constant shifting between wet and dry can deplete the natural oils in the hoof wall and lead to dryness and cracking, just as a person gets cracked,

chapped hands when they are in and out of water continually.

If you live in a wet climate and the horse is standing in mud or walking around in a wet pasture, its feet may become too soft and weak. If the integrity of your horse's feet is compromised by environmental conditions, ask your farrier about hoof products you could use in between visits.

### Check Those Shoes

If you are going to ride a shod horse, check each foot before you ride — not only to make sure the bottom of the foot is clean, but also that the shoe is tight and no nails are working loose.

At the end of every ride, before you put the horse away in its stall or pasture, check the feet and shoes again. A rock jammed into the shoe might not be obvious until you look. It might not cause lameness immediately, but if a horse has to walk on it for a few more hours (or days!) it might create a bruise.

Even if your horse is out at pasture and not being ridden, or has some days off, don't ignore your duties. It pays to do periodic checking to make sure your horse is healthy and sound. Unless you check, you won't see an injury, a stone bruise, a rock or stick jammed into the bottom of the foot, a shoe coming loose or feet that are beginning to crack and chip.

There is no substitute for "the eye of the master" when it comes to taking care of horses. If you notice a problem early, you can take care of it immediately if it's something you can handle. Otherwise, call your farrier and ask that your horse's next appointment be moved up. **Ω**